

AIR POLLUTION

EPA rejects push to warn towns about carcinogen

Sean Reilly, E&E News reporter

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Protesters outside a Sterigenics International LLC facility, which emits ethylene oxide. @StopSterigenics/Twitter

EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler has given a final rebuff to an in-house watchdog's urgent recommendation on the steps needed to warn more than two dozen communities of the risks posed by an airborne carcinogen.

Instead, Wheeler sided with EPA's air office in a testy standoff with the agency's inspector general, according to a memo posted online today by the IG. Wheeler's decision, made earlier this month, appears to be the last word; a spokesman for Inspector General Sean O'Donnell had no immediate comment.

The clash originated in a rare "management alert" issued by the inspector general's office last March, pressing EPA to do more to reach out to communities at significantly higher risk from exposure to ethylene oxide, a cancer-causing pollutant that's also used to sterilize medical equipment (*E&E News PM*, March 31, 2020). Wheeler, who has previously stressed the importance of "risk communication," immediately called for the report to be withdrawn so it could be "appropriately updated" (*Greenwire*, April 1, 2020).

After O'Donnell declined to do so, the two sides continued to spar over the IG's central recommendation that EPA do more for the communities around 25 "high-priority" facilities "with a forum for an interactive exchange of information with the EPA or the states regarding health concerns related to exposure to ethylene oxide."

But in a May response, Doug Benevento, EPA's associate deputy administrator, said that more work was needed to better understand the health risks. While the agency later signaled plans to begin all initial outreach by this coming May, O'Donnell said those plans did not "reflect the seriousness" associated with the 25 facilities and lacked a commitment to using virtual workshops and other interactive means to contact those surrounding communities.

As part of an audit dispute resolution process, O'Donnell then turned to David Bloom, EPA's acting chief financial officer, for help. But in the newly posted memo, Bloom indicated that he was unable to broker an agreement between the inspector general and the air office and thus sent the matter to Wheeler for a decision.

In an unsigned December response also posted online today, EPA said it had proposed additional outreach efforts to be accompanied by periodic status reports but that O'Donnell's staff had found they still didn't go far enough.

Nonetheless, the response said, the air office "remains committed to its plan and intends to post the promised status reports to the Web shortly."

Twitter: @ScanatGreenwireEmail: sreilly@eenews.net

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